

**Amendments to the Claims:**

This listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

**Listing of Claims:**

1. (Currently Amended) A flexible riser system for a loading system for transferring hydrocarbons between a sea bed installation and a vessel floating at a sea surface, comprising:

a flexible riser being configured to be lowered to a submerged, protected position below the sea surface and disconnected from the vessel when the riser is in a non-operative position; and

protection means for protecting the riser from impact when the riser is connected to the vessel, the protection means being submerged and covering at least an upper part of the riser when the riser is submerged and connected to the vessel ~~below the vessel during operations and when in the non-operative position where the riser is retracted to its retracted position, and terminating above the sea bed when the flexible riser is connected to the vessel,~~ the protecting means being formed of a plurality of separate units suspended from each other, the protecting means further being provided with a stretching means or a tensioning means attached to a lower end of the protection means ~~and terminating above the sea bed when the flexible riser is connected to the vessel,~~ the protection means being configured to retract to a protected position below the sea surface together with the riser when the riser is in the non-operative position,

wherein the riser in the vicinity of the stretching or tensioning means is provided with a collar designed to reduce detrimental impact on the riser caused by relative movement of the stretching or tensioning means with respect to the riser.

2. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 1, wherein the riser protection means is temporarily suspended from the vessel.

3. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 1, wherein the riser protection means is suspended from a submerged turret loading buoy.

4. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 1, wherein the stretching or tensioning means is formed by an annular body surrounding the flexible riser.

5. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 1, wherein the stretching or tensioning means is moored to the sea bed by means of wires.

6. (Currently Amended) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 1, wherein the stretching or tensioning means at the lower end of its interior surface is provided with a curved surface opposing an outer surface of the collar designed to reduce detrimental impact or wear and tear on the riser caused by relative movement of the stretching means.

7. (Cancelled).

8. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 1, wherein the stretching or tensioning means are suspended by means of chains or wires carrying the riser protection.

9. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 1, wherein the riser protection means is formed by a plurality of separate hollow elements, each being suspended by means of chains or lines.

10. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 9, wherein the hollow elements are truncated and conical with a smaller upper diameter and a larger lower diameter or vice versa.

11. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 9, wherein the hollow elements forming the riser protection means are stacked on top of each other when in a retracted position.

12. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 1, wherein the riser protection means is completely retractable into a sheltered position on the vessel.

13. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 9, wherein the hollow elements are provided with internally coating or friction reducing layer in order to minimize friction or load impact between the riser and the protection means, enabling the riser to move freely within the riser protection means.

14. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 9, wherein each hollow element at its wider edge is provided with a stacking ridge enabling the hollow element to be stacked on a next element.

15. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 10, wherein the hollow elements forming the riser protection means are stacked on top of each other when in a retracted position.

16. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 1, wherein when the protection means is retracted to a protected position below the sea surface together with the riser when the riser is in the non-operative position, the protection means is detached from the vessel.

17. (New) A loading system for transferring hydrocarbons between a sea bed installation and a vessel floating at a sea surface, comprising:  
a vessel floating at a sea surface; and  
a flexible riser system comprising:

a flexible riser being configured to be lowered to a submerged, protected position below the sea surface and disconnected from the vessel when the riser is in a non-operative position; and

protection means connected to the vessel for protecting the riser from impact, the protection means being submerged below the vessel and covering at least an upper part of the riser, and terminating above the sea bed, the protection means being formed of a plurality of separate units suspended from each other and a stretching means or a tensioning means arranged at a lower end of the protection means, the protection means being configured to retract to a protected position below the sea surface together with the riser when the riser is in the non-operative position.

18. (New) A loading system according to claim 17, wherein the riser protection means is temporarily suspended from the vessel.

19. (New) A loading system according to claim 17, wherein the riser protection means is suspended from a submerged turret loading buoy.

20. (New) A loading system according to claim 17, wherein the stretching or tensioning means is formed by an annular body surrounding the flexible riser.

21. (New) A loading system according to claim 17, wherein the stretching or tensioning means is moored to the sea bed by means of wires.

22. (New) A loading system according to claim 17, wherein the stretching or tensioning means at the lower end of its interior surface is provided with a curved surface designed to reduce detrimental impact or wear and tear on the riser caused by relative movement of the stretching means.

23. (New). A loading system according to claim 17, wherein the riser in the vicinity of the stretching or tensioning means is provided with a collar designed to reduce

detrimental impact on the riser caused by relative movement of the stretching or tension means with respect to the riser.

24. (New) A loading system according to claim 17, wherein the stretching or tensioning means is suspended by means of chains or wires carrying the riser protection.

25. (New) A loading system according to claim 17, wherein the riser protection means is formed by a plurality of separate hollow elements, each being suspended by means of chains or lines.

26. (New) A loading system according to claim 25, wherein the hollow elements are truncated and conical with a smaller upper diameter and a larger lower diameter or vice versa.

27. (New) A loading system according to claim 25, wherein the hollow elements forming the riser protection means are stacked on top of each other when in a retracted position.

28. (New) A loading system according to claim 17, wherein the riser protection means is completely retractable into a sheltered position on the vessel.

29. (New) A loading system according to claim 25, wherein the hollow elements are provided with internally coating or friction reducing layer in order to minimize friction or load impact between the riser and the protection means, enabling the riser to move freely within the riser protection means.

30. (New) A loading system according to claim 25, wherein each hollow element at its wider edge is provided with a stacking ridge enabling the hollow element to be stacked on a next element.

31. (New) A loading system according to claim 26, wherein the hollow elements forming the riser protection means are stacked on top of each other when in a retracted position.

32. (New) A loading system according to claim 17, wherein when the protection means is retracted to a protected position below the sea surface together with the riser when the riser is in the non-operative position, the protection means is detached from the vessel.

33 (New) A method of operating a flexible riser system for a loading system for transferring hydrocarbons between a sea bed installation and a vessel floating at a sea surface, the flexible riser system having a flexible riser and a protection means formed of a plurality of separate units suspended from each other and a stretching means or a tensioning means, the method comprising:

transferring hydrocarbons between the sea bed installation and the vessel while the protection means is connected to the vessel and submerged below the vessel, such that the protection means covers at least an upper part of the riser and such that both the plurality of separate units and the stretching or tensioning means are disposed above the sea bed, the protection means arranged to protect the riser from impact.

34 (New) The method of claim 33 further comprising:

retracting the protection means to a protected position below the sea surface together with the riser when the riser is not operating to transfer hydrocarbons between the sea bed installation and the vessel.